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NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

OCTOBER, 1921

THE FAMILY MAGAZINE

BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

READERS who like magazines will be pleased, those who do not like them perhaps distressed, to learn, if they are not already aware of it, that the magazine as we know it to-day is distinctly an American creation. They may stir, or soothe, their aroused emotions by considering that the magazine which began in England literally as a storehouse of miscellanies attained in mid-nineteenth century United States a dignity, a harmony, and a format which gave it preëminence among periodicals. *Harper's* and *The Century* in particular shared with Mark Twain and the sewing machine the honor of making America familiarly known abroad.

I do not wish to overburden this essay with history, but one of the reasons for the appearance of such a dominating medium in a comparatively unliterary country is relevant to the discussion to follow. The magazine of those days was vigorous. It was vigorous because, unlike other American publications, it was not oppressed by competition. Until the laws of international copyright were completed, the latest novels of the Victorians, then at their prime, could be rushed from a steamer, and distributed in editions which were cheap because no royalties had to be paid. Thackeray and Dickens could be sold at a discount, where American authors of less reputation had to meet full charges. And the like was true of poetry. But the magazine, like the newspaper, was not international; it was national at least in its entirety, and for it British periodicals could not be substituted. Furthermore,

it could, and did, especially in its earlier years, steal unmercifully from England, so that a subscriber got both homebrew and imported for a single payment. Thus the magazine flourished in the mid-century while the American novel declined.

A notable instance of this vigor was the effect of the growing magazine upon the infant short story. Our American magazine made the development of the American short story possible by creating a need for good short fiction. The rise of our short story, after a transitional period when the earliest periodicals and the illustrated Annuals sought good short stories and could not get them, coincides with the rise of the family magazine. It was such a demand that called forth the powers in prose of the poet, Poe. And as our magazine has become the best of its kind, so in the short story, and in the short story alone, does American literature rival the more fecund literatures of England and Europe.

That a strong and native tendency made the American magazine is indicated by the effect of our atmosphere upon the periodical which the English have always called a review. Import that form, as was done for *THE NORTH AMERICAN*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Forum*, or *The Yale Review*, and immediately the new American periodical begins to be a little more of a magazine, a little more miscellaneous in its content, a little less of a critical survey. Critical articles give place to memoirs and sketches, fiction or near fiction creeps in. There is always a tendency to lose type and be absorbed into the form that the mid-century had made so successful: a periodical, handsomely illustrated, with much fiction, some description, a little serious comment on affairs written for the general reader, occasional poetry, and enough humor to guarantee diversion. This is our national medium for literary expression—an admirable medium for a nation of long-distance commuters. And it is this “family magazine” I wish to discuss in its literary aspects.

The dominance of the family magazine as a purveyor of general literature in America has continued, but in our own time the species (like other strong organisms) has divided into two genres, which are more different than, on the surface, they appear. The illustrated *literary* magazine (the family magazine *par excellence*) must now be differentiated from the illustrated *journalistic* maga-

zine, but both are as American in origin as the review and the critical weekly are English.

It was the native vigor of the family magazine that led to the Great Divergence of the 'nineties, which older readers will remember well. The literary historian of that period usually gives a different explanation. He is accustomed to say that the old-time "quality" magazines, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and the rest, were growing moribund when, by an effort of editorial genius, Mr. McClure created a new and rebellious type of magazine, which was rapidly imitated. We called it, as I remember, for want of a better title, the fifteen-cent magazine. In the wake of *McClure's*, came *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Ladies Home Journal*, and all the long and profitable train which adapted the McClurean discovery to special needs and circumstances.

I do not believe that this is a true statement of what happened in the fruitful 'nineties. *McClure's* was not, speaking biologically, a new species at all; it was only a mutation in which the recessive traits of the old magazine became dominant while the invaluable type was preserved. To speak more plainly, the literary magazine, as America knew it, had always printed news, matured news, often stale news, but still journalism. Read any number of *Harper's* in the 'seventies for proof. And, *pari passu*, American journalism was eagerly trying to discover some outlet for its finer products, a medium where good pictures, sober after-thoughts, and the finish that comes from careful writing were possible. *Harper's Weekly* in Civil War days, and later, was its creation.

And now it was happily discovered that the family magazine had a potential popularity far greater than its limited circulation. With its month-long period of incubation, its elastic form, in which story, special article, poetry, picture, humor could all be harmoniously combined, only a redistribution of emphasis was necessary in order to make broader its appeal. Mr. McClure journalized the family magazine. He introduced financial and economic news in the form of sensational investigations, he bid for stories more lively, more immediate in their interest, more journalistic than we were accustomed to read (Kipling's journalistic stories for example, were first published in America in *McClure's*.) He accepted pictures in which certainty of hitting the

public eye was substituted for a guarantee of art. And yet, with a month to prepare his number, and only twelve issues a year, he could pay for excellence, and insure it, as no newspaper had ever been able to do. And he was freed from the incubus of "local news" and day-by-day reports. In brief, under his midwifery, the literary magazine gave birth to a super-newspaper.

Needless to say, the great increase in the number of American readers and the corresponding decline in the average intelligence and discrimination of the reading public had much to do with the success of the journalistic magazine. Yet it may be stated, with equal truth, that the rapid advance in the average intelligence of the American public as a whole made a market for a super-newspaper in which nothing was hurried and everything well done. The contributions to literature through this new journalism have been at least as great during the period of its existence as from the "quality" magazine, the contributions toward the support of American authors much greater. Like all good journalism, it has included real literature when it could get and "get away with it."

Birth, however, in the literary as in the animal world, is exhausting and often leaves the parent in a debility which may lead to death. The periodical essay of the eighteenth century bore the novel of character, and died; the Gothic tale of a later date perished of the short story to which it gave its heart blood. The family magazine of the literary order has been debile, so radical critics charge, since its journalistic offspring began to sweep America. Shall it die?

By no means. An America without the illustrated literary magazine, dignified, respectable, certain to contain something that a reader of taste can peruse with pleasure, would be an unfamiliar America. And it would be a barer America. In spite of our brood of special magazines for the *litterati* and the advanced, which Mr. Ford Madox Hueffer praises so warmly, we are not so well provided with the distributive machinery for a national culture as to flout a recognized agency with a gesture and a sneer. But the family magazine has undeniably lost its vigorous appeal, and must be reinvigorated. The malady is due to no slackening of literary virility in the country; indeed there has probably not been so much literary energy in the country since the 'forties as now—not nearly so much. Nor is it due to a lack

of good readers. Nor, in my opinion, to the competition of the journalistic magazine. The literary magazine does not compete, or at least ought not to compete, with its offspring, for it appeals either to a different audience or to different tastes.

Roughly stated, the trouble is that the public for these excellent magazines has changed, and they have not. Their public always was, and is, the so-called "refined" home public. Homes have changed, especially "refined" homes, and a new home means a new public.

The refined home nowadays has been to college. (There are a million college graduates now in the United States.) Forty years ago only scattered members had gone beyond the school. I do not propose to exaggerate the influence upon intelligence of a college education. It is possible, nay, it is common, to go through college and come out in any real sense uneducated. But it is not possible to pass through college, even as a professional amateur in athletics or as an inveterate flapper, without rubbing off the insulation here and there, without knowing what thought is stirring, what emotions are poignant, what ideas are dominant among the fraction of humanity that leads us. Refined homes may not be better or happier than they used to be, but if they are intellectual at all, they are more vigorously intellectual.

This means at the simplest that home readers of the kind I have been describing want stimulating food, not what our grandfathers used to call "slops." Sometimes they feed exclusively upon highly spiced journalism, but if they are literary in their tastes they will be less content with merely literary stories, with articles that are too solid to be good journalism, yet too popular to be profound, less content, in short, with dignity as a substitute for force.

What should be done about it specifically is a question for editors to answer. But this may be said. If the old literary omnibus is to continue, as it deserves, to hold the centre of the roadway, then it must be driven with some vigor of the intellect to match the vigor of news which has carried its cheaper contemporary fast and far. By definition it cannot embrace a cause or a thesis, like the weeklies, and thank Heaven for that! It is clearly unsafe to stand upon mere dignity, respectability, or cost. That way

lies decadence—such as overcame the old *Quarterlies*, the *Annals*, and the periodical essayists. Vigor it must get, of a kind naturally belonging to its species, not violent, not raucous, not premature. It must recapture its public, and this is especially the “old American” (which does *not* mean the Anglo-Saxon) element in our mingled nation.

These old Americans are not moribund by any means, and it is ridiculous to suppose, as some recent importations in criticism do, that a merely respectable magazine will represent them. A good many of them, to be sure, regard magazines as table decorations, and for such a clientele someone some day will publish a monthly so ornamental that it will be unnecessary to read it in order to share its beneficent influences. The remainder are intellectualized, and many of them are emancipated from the conventions of the last generation, if not from those of their own. These demand a new vitality of brain, emotion, and spirit in their literary magazine, and it must be given to them.

No better proof of all this could be sought than the renaissance in our own times of the reviews and the weeklies, probably the most remarkable phenomenon in the history of American publishing since the birth of yellow journalism. By the weeklies I do not mean journals like *The Outlook*, *The Independent*, *Vanity Fair*, which are merely special varieties of the typically American magazine. I refer, of course, to *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *The Freeman*, *The Weekly Review*, periodicals formed upon an old English model, devoted to the spreading of opinion, and consecrated to the propagation of intelligence. The success of these weeklies has been out of proportion to their circulation. Like the old *Nation*, which in a less specialized form was their predecessor, they have distinctly affected American thinking, and may yet affect our action in politics, education, and social relations generally. They are pioneers, with the faults of intellectual pioneers, over-seriousness, over-emphasis, dogmatism, and intolerance. Yet it may be said fairly that their chief duty, as with the editorial pages of newspapers, is to be consistently partisan. At least they have proved that the American will take thinking when he can get it. And by inference, one assumes that he will take strong feeling and vigorous truth in his literary magazines.

The reviews also show how the wind is blowing. The review, so-called, is a periodical presenting articles of some length, and usually critical in character, upon the political, social, and literary problems of the day. The distinction of the review is that its sober form and not too frequent appearance enable it to give matured opinion with space enough to develop it.

Clearly a successful review must depend upon a clientele with time and inclination to be seriously interested in discussion, and that is why the review, until recently, has best flourished in England where it was the organ of a governing class. In America, an intellectual class who felt themselves politically and socially responsible, has been harder to discover. We had one in the early days of the Republic, when *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* was founded. It is noteworthy that we are developing another now and have seen *The Yale Review*, the late lamented *Unpartisan Review*, *The Forum*, and others join *THE NORTH AMERICAN*, fringed, so to speak, by magazines of excerpt (of which much might be written), such as *The Review of Reviews*, *Current Opinion*, and *The Literary Digest*, in which the function of the review is discharged for the great community that insists upon reading hastily.

The review has come to its own with the war and reconstruction; which, considering its handicaps, is another argument that the family magazine should heed the sharpening of the American intellect. But, except for the strongest members of the family, it is still struggling, and still dependent for long life upon cheapness of production rather than breadth of appeal.

The difficulty is not so much with the readers as the writers. The review must largely depend upon the specialist writer (who alone has the equipment for specialist writing), and the American specialist cannot usually write well enough to command general intelligent attention. This is particularly noticeable in the minor reviews where contributions are not paid for and most of the writing is, in a sense, amateur, but it holds good in the magazines and the national reviews also. The specialist knows his politics, his biology, or his finance as well as his English or French contemporary, but he cannot digest his subject into words—he can think into it, but not out of it, and so cannot write accept-

ably for publication. Hence in science particularly, but also in biography, in literary criticism, and less often in history, we have to depend frequently upon English pens for our illumination.

The reasons for this very serious deficiency, much more serious from every point of view than the specialists realize, are well known to all but the specialists, and I do not propose to enter into them here. My point is that this very defect, which has made it so difficult to edit a valid and interesting review (and so creditable to succeed as we have in several instances succeeded), is a brake also upon the family magazine in its attempt to regain virility. The newspaper magazines have cornered the market for clever reporters who tap the reservoirs of special knowledge and then spray it acceptably upon the public. This is good as far as it goes, but does not go far. The scholars must serve us themselves—and are too often incapable.

Editorial embarrassments are increased, however, by the difficulty of finding these intellectualized old Americans who have drifted away from the old magazines and are being painfully collected in dribblets by the weeklies and the reviews. They do not, unfortunately for circulation, all live in a London, or Paris. They are scattered in towns, cities, university communities, lonely plantations, all over a vast country. Probably that intellectualized public upon which all good magazines as well as all good reviews must depend, has not yet become so stratified and homogeneous after the upheavals of our generation that a commercial success of journalistic magnitude is possible, but it can and must be found.

The success of *The Atlantic Monthly* in finding a sizable and homogeneous public through the country is interesting in just this connection. It has, so it is generally understood, been very much a question of *finding*—of going West after the departing New Englander and his children, and hunting him out with the goods his soul desired. One remembers the Yankee peddlers who in the old days penetrated the frontier with the more material products of New England, pans, almanacs, and soap. But an observer must also note a change in the character of *The Atlantic* itself, how it has gradually changed from a literary and political review, to a literary and social magazine, with every element of the familiar American type except illustrations and a profusion

of fiction; how in the attempt to become more interesting without becoming journalistic it has extended its operations to cover a wider and wider arc of human appeal. It has both lost and gained in the transformation, but it has undoubtedly proved itself adaptable and therefore alive. This is not an argument that the reviews should become magazines and that the old-line magazine should give up specializing in pictures and in fiction. Of course not. It is simply more proof that vigor, adaptability, and a keen sense of existing circumstances are the tonics they also need. The weekly lacks balance, the review professional skill in the handling of serious subjects, the family magazine a willingness to follow the best public taste wherever it leads.

It has been very difficult in this discussion, which I fear has resembled a shot-gun charge rather than a rifle bullet, to keep the single aim I have had in mind. The history of the periodical in American literary thinking has not yet been written. The history of American literary thinking has not yet been written. The history of American literature has but just been begun. My object has been to put the spotlight for a moment upon the typical American magazine, with just enough of its environment to make a background. What is seen there can best be summarized by a comparison. The American weekly is like the serious American play of the period. It has an over-emphasis upon lesson, bias, thesis, point. The review is like much American poetry. It is worthy, and occasionally admirable, but as a type it is weakened by amateur mediocrity in the art of writing. The family magazine is like the American short story. It has conventionalized into an often successful immobility. Both must move again, become flexible, vigorous, or their date will be upon them. And the family magazine, the illustrated literary magazine, is the most interesting vehicle of human expression and interpretation that we Americans have created. With a new and greater success, it will draw all our other efforts with it. If it fails, hope for the interesting review, the well-balanced weekly, is precarious. If they all submerge, we who like to read with discrimination and gusto will have to take to books as an exclusive diet, or make our choice between boredom and journalism.

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